Igniting Inclusion at the SPARK Museum

Marie D. Baeta

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

Background

Museums continue to struggle to provide experiences that are inclusive to disabled people. It is known that truly inclusive experiences move beyond physical access to include cognitive, social, and emotional access. Given that there are no federal regulations around this expanded definition of inclusion, it is not surprising that disabled people are still underrepresented in museum visitorship.

Considering that one in four Americans are disabled, museums are at risk for excluding a large segment of the population. In addition, designing museum exhibits and programs to be more inclusive has been shown to benefit all visitors, not just those with disabilities.

In order to truly be institutions that serve the public equitably, it's imperative that museums undertake the work to become inclusive or they are at risk of perpetuating the exclusion and oppression of disabled people.

Beyond institutional will, the lack of centralized and clear guidelines around inclusion beyond physical accessibility is a challenge for museums who want to take on this work.

For small museums the challenge is greater due to limited staff, resources, time and funding. But small museums also often have close community ties, more flexibility in pivoting focus, and close collaboration between staff.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to build internal capacity within a small museum to integrate and apply inclusive design principles.

This project intended to give museum staff understanding of disabled visitors' experience of the MegaZapper show, understand the benefits of collaborating with User Experts, feel more confident in providing inclusive experiences for museum visitors, and build connections with local disabled people and experts.

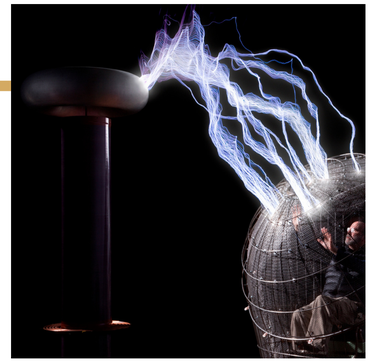
In addition, this project aimed to increase feelings of inclusion, acceptance, and connection for SPARK museum visitors, especially disabled visitors.

Deliverable

This project provided a proof-of-concept model for the assessment and redesign of a science show at the SPARK Museum of Electricity, a small, hands-on science museum. It incorporated User Experts (disabled people) and aligned with guidelines for inclusive science programming.

Process

Collaborated with SPARK staff to choose a program to redesign, identified their goals for the project, and planned to conduct a mini Access Advisory Group with User Experts for 5 consecutive group meetings.

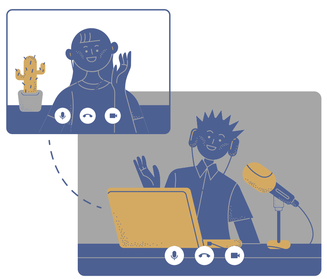


User Experts (people with a disability or experts in the field) were identified through museum connections and my professional network and asked to give their feedback on the MegaZapper Show.

Most User Experts were unable to commit to all 5 meetings. In order to ensure maximum input, we pivoted to individual interviews.

We compiled a list of interview questions based on the museum's project goals and informed by the Universal Design Guidelines for Public Programming in Science Museums.

I conducted 6 User Expert interviews and compiled their feedback. SPARK staff and I discussed and created a weighted list of recommended changes to the MegaZapper show based on this feedback.



Due to the unexpected absence of a museum staff member, we had to rethink our approach to the timeline of programmatic changes.

To further internal capacity for designing inclusively, I will create a set of guidelines for the museum that will aid in the development of future inclusive programming.

Conclusions

Outcomes that this project met successfully included;

- Increasing internal knowledge and application of inclusive design for programming.
- Exposure to methods of incorporating User Experts.
- Actionable list of changes for the MegaZapper Show.
- Guidelines for developing future inclusive programming.

Points of incongruence within this project included;

- Missed opportunity to build direct relationships with local community; User Expert interviews were not done by museum staff.
- Doubts about feasibility to replicate the process without increased staffing capacity and financial compensation for User Experts.
- Unaligned expectations around capacity and project goals.

Next Steps

The SPARK Museum will develop and apply the recommended changes to the MegaZapper presentation.

They plan to use the guidelines I'm creating to ensure that future programs are designed with inclusion in mind from the beginning of the development process.

They hope to continue to build relationships with disabled members and local community, and integrate their insights into future program development.

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References

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